

WASHINGTON FAIR TRADE COALITION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
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BOB BARNES OF SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS

INTERVIEWEE: BOB BARNES

INTERVIEWERS: CINDY COLE

SUBJECTS: Segregation; desegregation; civil rights; electric guitars; Students for a Democratic Society (SDS); Vietnam War; conscientious objector status; *The Ally* newspaper; fragging; antiwar movement; Fort Lewis Six; The Red Star Singers; The Shelter Half G.I. coffeehouse; Court C G.I. coffeehouse; Ship Scalpers Union; Laborers' International Union of North America; Mafia; liberation theology; Pacific Coast Metal Trades Council; Pacific American Shipowners Association; Ship Scalpers Union Local 541; Ship Scalpers Union Local 252; Nicaragua; El Salvador; National Rainbow Coalition; Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU); Rise Up! Productions; King County Labor Council; AFL-CIO; Northwest Folklife; Great Labor Arts Exchange; New York Labor Chorus; formation of the Seattle Labor Chorus; the Mural Lawn stage; *Links in a Chain*; labor movement; civil rights movement; Total Experience Gospel Choir; protest against Shell; Bob Dylan; Country Joe Fish; Larry Caroline; Lou Truskoff; Jim Douglas; Jim Page; Angelo Fosco; Jesse Jackson; Scott Reed; John Sweeney; Al Gore; Ron Judd; Pete Seeger; Anne Feeney; Charlie King; Jon Fromer; Elise Bryant; Janet Stecher; Joan Truskoff; Jim Roe.

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[00:00:00] **CINDY COLE:** This is a recording for the Seattle Labor Chorus oral history project. It is happening on May 21, 2025, with Bob Barnes.

Bob, why don't you just give us a little bit of history—where you were born, the date, etc?

[00:00:28] **BOB BARNES:** Okay. I was born in Long Prairie, Minnesota on January 30, 1946. We lived in Long Prairie for about six years. My dad was a second-generation small business owner. He had a clothing store in Long Prairie. He'd go out to Colorado every year with some buddies to go mule deer hunting, and loved that, and loved Colorado.

He, with some consultation with my mom, decided they were going to move to Colorado. In 1952, we moved to Denver, where we stayed for a year, and Aurora for a year, and then Boulder till 1960. He bought a motel up in Boulder. We lived on the outskirts of town, close to the Boulder River. We used to climb on the flatirons. It was an idyllic place. Boulder, at that time, was 25,000 people.

I have one brother. He's two years younger than me. He currently lives in Provo, Utah.

In 1960, we moved to Paris, Texas. That was a major culture shock for me because I'd done a lot of my growing up in Boulder, which was a fairly enlightened town. It was desegregated. Paris in 1960 Texas, most everywhere down there was still segregated, so I went to a segregated high school, which was weirdly not weird. I was fairly oblivious to all that stuff at the time.

It was only after the fact [that I thought] , that was really damn weird. The school was desegregated when my brother was still in high school. I think I was in the last graduating class that went through the segregated era.

It was pretty weird down there. I can remember driving into Greenville, Texas, which was on the way to Dallas, and there was a huge sign over the main road into town saying Welcome to Greenville, home of the blackest soil and the whitest people. And they were proud of that. That stayed up for a few years after the federal law changed.

Because I was in this weird place, I brought with me this damn Yankee-ness, which still is an issue, but back in the 60s, the Civil War was still really alive. I was kind of an outsider. It took me a while to claim some turf there.

I spoke a foreign dialect. I thought everybody else spoke a foreign dialect. I couldn't understand half the people for the first couple months I was there. [laughing] I remember one teacher who was from the North who spoke a similar dialect to me, and I went up to her one day and in the second week and I said, "I'm so glad you're here. I can understand you." She was an anchor.

My dad and mom, I would say, were soft-core racists. They weren't cross-burners, but my dad—and this was probably motivated as much by his business sense as anything—did not rent rooms to people of color. When the law came down and he was forced to, he would segregate in the farthest units in the motel, which, interestingly, were the nicest rooms in the whole motel. Black families would come in and rent rooms and they'd get the best rooms.

After the folks had checked in, Dad would always write on the registration cards and put a C up in the upper corner, of course, standing for colored. When I got wind of that, I'd go down every night and write W on all of the rest of the cards. I don't know what motivated me to do that. I had no civil rights training. I had no friends who were in the Civil Rights Movement. The only thing I knew about was what I read in the paper, and the Paris Daily News wasn't particularly sympathetic to the civil right struggle, but it just seemed weird that he would do that, so I responded in like.

I was always interested in music. I was one of those kids who hung with other kids and we'd pretend we were DJs and put on little shows on the back deck. I hooked up with some kids in high school, a couple of whom played instruments.

Just on a serendipity thing, we put together an act for our German club. We all had taken German class. We did a couple of songs and got known as the guys that did music and that stuck. Probably in our junior and for sure senior high school years, we had a couple of folk groups. One was the Kinsmen. One was the Oxfords. I was kind of in the Kinsman, and all the way in the Oxfords.

It was a Smothers Brothers rip-off. We did straight up a lot of the Smothers Brothers stuff. We also put on shows. We performed at assemblies.

We funded our first couple class reunions by putting on a variety show called "A Midsummer Nightmare" that we brought a bunch of talent in and we all performed in. [laughing] Had a great time.

We stuck together through high school, and in junior college—I went to Paris Junior College in Paris, Texas, and most of my gang went to PJC also—we discovered, along with Bob Dylan and a whole bunch of other people, you could plug your guitars in and make them electric.

We formed one of the first rock 'n' roll bands in East Texas. I think there were two others at the time. We did a lot of gigs on the weekends and played a lot. I think I probably played and practiced music more than I studied. It's amazing I got a degree.

I moved and all of the band moved to Commerce, Texas, which is about 40 miles from Paris, where we went to East Texas State University. Kept the band together and played every weekend.

[00:07:24] **CINDY:** What did you play?

[00:07:25] **BOB:** I played bass. I wasn't that good on the guitar, and the bass had fewer strings, and we needed a bass player. [laughing] So, I bought me a bass and taught myself how to play it. That got us through those years.

I also played in a jug band called the 1928 Hupmobile, based on a 1928 Hupmobile car that sat out in front of the coolest barbecue joint in Commerce, Texas. I always said that I played in a jug band for fun and a rock 'n' roll band for money. We didn't make enough money—enough to pay for our gear, which was kind of expensive, and the liquor. Drank a lot of liquor during those years. [laughing] Once again, I don't know how I got a degree because we were spending a lot of time doing music.

I also got exposed a little bit to politics, and it was just by default, in a way. One of my roommates—who was a little more political than me, and I wasn't much—probably the most political act we did was we'd sing Country Joe Fish's Fixin' to Die Rag, about the war.

But my roomie, David, hooked with some folks from the Students for a Democratic Society in Austin and invited them to come out and put on—they were doing little roadshows. It'd be a festival. They'd bring people in and have speakers and have music.

We rented a field in the outskirts of Commerce and publicized this, and we realized that we were getting in a whole lot of trouble because we were in East Texas in 1968 and there were a lot of redneck cowboys down there who didn't cotton too much to the likes of the SDS and the radical politics that they brought with them.

We thought we were going to have a pretty hostile time. We went into the day [and became] pretty trepidatious because there had been some threats made and a few confrontations. But these folks that came in from Austin knew what they were doing, and they knew how to defuse situations. We ended up having an amazing festival. A lot of people came.

For me, the high point of the whole thing was afterwards, a bunch of us got together in a tavern, and a bunch of these cowboys came, and we all had a great time talking. By the time the evening was over, we were best buddies. It was an example of the transformativeness of just speaking truth, being out there with your politics and not being confrontational about it, and having a good time with it. It was amazing to see that happen before my eyes.

During this same period of time, I had already joined the Army in an advanced enlistment program. I was about to graduate from college—this was 1968—and I didn't want to go to grad school, wasn't planning on getting married and having kids, and didn't have huge moral objections to joining the Army, so I joined the Army.

This was the three-month period before I actually went in. Some of these guys from the SDS were trying to talk me out of going. I wasn't opposed to it, but they were speaking a language I didn't understand. It was like they were talking over my head and I just didn't get it.

So, in September 1968, I found myself at Fort Polk, Louisiana, four years older than most of the kids I was in basic training with, and a lot whiter than most of the kids I was in basic training with. Most of the folks were there because they'd either been drafted or given a choice by a judge for some minor infraction they'd committed that they could either go to jail or join the Army, and they figured that was the better choice.

I was supposed to be headed for officer candidate school. That was one of the things that I'd signed up for. I realized early on several things. One, this was a mistake—I did not belong here in this Army thing—and two that there was no way I was going to be in a position of leading these kids in a war that I was already mildly opposed to.

The premise upon which I'd joined the Army—this was my Army recruiter friend—was that I was going to be in the Adjutant General's Corps. I was going to go to embassy parties in D.C. for four years, and it would be easy duty. Oh, by the way, you do have to sign up for combat training, but that doesn't mean anything because you won't be going into combat.

I bought it. I was totally naive about all of this stuff. Unfortunately, my friends in the SDS, when they were trying to convince me otherwise, were speaking a language I didn't understand.

I went through basic training. I went through advanced infantry training pretty much every day thinking, this is not going to work. I don't know what I'm going to do. I wanted to throw my gun away and walk off, knowing that no good would come of that.

Then another one of these transformative moments happened. We were scheduled to graduate from advanced infantry training and most of the guys were going to ship out to 'Nam. A couple weeks after Christmas, we were all given a week off for Christmas break and told, "Come back for the two weeks and you'll get your orders, but you'll have a two-week leave to go say good-bye to your families." This was the premise upon which we all took off for Christmas break.

When we got back, that changed. We were told, "You're immediately going to get shipped out to wherever your orders say you're going to." For most of the kids, it was Vietnam. People were angry, freaked out, upset, didn't know what the hell to do. None of us did.

I had kept the phone number of one of the guys from the SDS and called him. Larry Caroline was his name. Good guy. I called him and said, “Larry, what the hell? We’ve got a crisis here. Help us out. Give us some advice.”

He told me about conscientious objector status. It was probably the only legal way you could get out of combat. A tough path, but it was a way. We also talked about deserting and going to Canada, but those were other options, or just refusing orders and going to jail. People were doing that, but that was a rough choice, too. But he laid out the spectrum of choices that we could take.

He also suggested that if people went AWOL and stated, after they’d left, that they were going to come back in two weeks and comply with their orders that the likelihood of them facing serious charges would be greatly reduced because the Army was looking for their cannon fodder.

I got that word out and for the first couple days, there was this kind of excitement that was way too visible probably, and people were openly talking about leaving. When people are marching in the Army, there’s the chants that folks do. Left, Right. This was whole companies doing this. Left. Right. AWOL. It was pretty out there.

But the last week that all stopped and there was this kind of quiet, calm, determined feeling that just permeated, and I didn’t know if that was just that people were freaked out that nothing was going to happen or what, because you don’t know. This was a pretty big deal. After eight weeks of basic training, having your humanity hammered out of you, and being taught to be totally subservient, to take a stand like that is pretty bold.

I wasn’t personally going to have to make that choice because I was scheduled to go to officer candidate school, so I was going to be sticking around. Come the night we all graduated from advanced infantry training, I had my car on base and put the word out that I was available to drive people into Leesville to the bus station.

I spent all night doing that. There were hundreds. I didn’t carry all of them, but there were hundreds of people who took off that night. From all reports I got—because I was in touch with a few of the guys—the vast majority of them checked in down at either Fort Ord or up here at Fort Lewis in two weeks, and there were no repercussions at all. There were no charges. The Army was glad to get their cannon fodder back.

There were a few guys that split and probably went up to Canada, I have no idea. But the vast majority of them checked back in. That was an amazing experience to just witness that happening.

I was still slotted to go to officer candidate school at that time and I entertained all sorts of fantasies about how I was going to deal with this. My main fantasy was that I was going to go through OCS, and then at graduation, when I was presented with my little gold bar—that’s what a second lieutenant would have—I would throw it down on the stage and denounce the military, and denounce the war, and probably get hauled immediately off to jail.

I decided not to do that just because I couldn’t bring myself to be dishonest. This was another four months’ of training I would have had and I just couldn’t see doing that, because by that point, I was starting to get a little public with my opposition to the war.

So, I took my friend from the SDS’s advice and filed for conscientious objector status. Turns out, I was the first person to have done that since World War II at Fort Polk, Louisiana, and they did not know how to deal with me. They’d removed the Army regulation from the manual, so I had to teach my commanding officer about that regulation. Every time I’d walk into his office, I had copies of it. He’d rip them out of my hands and tear them

up, so I walked around with extra copies of the AR 635-20, one of those things I'll carry with me forever, that number.

They finally accepted my application and I ended up doing a lot of KP, peeling a lot of potatoes for a while, while they processed my application, which they didn't know how to do because it hadn't been done lately.

As time passed, they figured they had to assign me somewhere. Permanent KP doesn't work, so they assigned me to the motor pool, and I knew very little about driving trucks and absolutely nothing about servicing any vehicle. So, after almost crashing a big truck into a telephone pole, they gave me a Jeep and made me the mail carrier.

My job was to deliver mail all over both north fort, south fort, and what they called tigerland, which is where the last bit of field exercise folks went through before they went to 'Nam. You were out in the jungle was what it was.

I was delivering mail to all these places, making contact with folks who were also opposed to the war. It didn't take long before we had a little network together and we were distributing some underground newspapers. There was a paper called The Ally. I can't remember where it came from, but I'd get a little stack of those every month and we'd distribute them.

Time went on because they still didn't know how to process my application. We did things like—I believe there's a New York Times full-page ad that came out sometime in late 69 of several hundred G.I.s who had signed this expressing their opposition to the war. We'd have semi-public events.

We had an event at a chapel on the base. It was basically a peace vigil. We had G.I.s that had come back from 'Nam who were going to speak about their opposition to the war. The program lasted about five minutes before they realized what we were up to and they shut us down. But it was another one of those mobilizing places where we got a bunch of people together whose lives were changed by it.

Six months into this, I got my first application back—it was disapproved because they said that I did not truly hold the beliefs, which I professed. I had a second application all ready to turn in, and I did, and they had to take it.

They'd gotten a little smarter by now. By this point, people were filing for CO status all over the country and doing other acts of other overt civil disobedience—abandoning their posts. There were more militant acts over in Vietnam. Fraggings were happening. A grenade was getting thrown into officers' tents. So, opposition to the war was growing.

My second application came back about a month later. The base commander took it upon himself to personally tell me that I could punch him in the face and he wouldn't bring charges because he wanted me off his base. [laughing]

I looked at the map to see where they were sending me on the way to Vietnam—because that's what happens when you get your CO status rejected, they send you a set of orders to Vietnam. I was issued my second set of orders to Vietnam. I was supposed to check in at Fort Lewis, Washington, which, upon looking at a map, I realized was close to Canada, and figured that opened up an option because I was not going to go to Vietnam. I was way consolidated by that point that there was no way I was going to go to Vietnam.

I was probably going to go to jail, but maybe I was going to go Canada. They gave me a free airplane ride out here to Canada. My wife at the time, my high school sweetheart, who had moved to Leesville when I was

stationed at Fort Lewis, flew out here. The first thing I did when we got checked in was to turn in my third application for discharge as a conscientious objector.

They put me in a barracks full of other soldiers who had filed for discharge as conscientious objectors. There were about 50 of us. We were basically isolated in this barracks. They gave us no duties. They would march us to meals separately, so we had no interaction with any of the other troops.

That was among the dumbest things they did because they put 50 guys who were pretty vocal in their opposition—and some very articulate in their opposition to the war—together with nothing to do but hang out and talk.

We made contact with the antiwar movement in Tacoma real quickly. Within days, we were going into town after dark—we weren't guarded—getting leaflets together, bringing them back to the base, urging other people to resist going to Vietnam.

After a couple weeks, the authorities figured they had to do something with us, so they sent us all through an interview to see what kind of skills we had. There were five or six of us who had office-related kinds of skills—I knew how to type—so they put us as staff running the company office, and turned us loose to be in charge of running this office, with typewriters and WATS lines and all the infrastructure for making leaflets. So, that became our base of operation.

Amazingly, the authorities let us get away—not let us, they didn't know what we were up to. We were living in fairly unprecedented times. This may have been the first time that the military was facing internal opposition to the degree it was and they just didn't have a reference point for what to do.

So, they were clueless, and we took advantage of their cluelessness. For a couple months, we had our base of operations in the office. We were making links nationally with the antiwar movement, and we were in touch with antiwar senators and congresspeople in D.C., and having a good old time.

And then, they found out. [laughing] Busted us and scattered us about. I was back in the motor pool. I don't know how I got tagged being in the motor pool.

About the same time, the applications for discharge came back. By this point, we had winnowed down to fewer than 20 who were still around then. Several people went AWOL—went up to Canada. I'm assuming that's where they went. One person was granted CO status. He was a Mennonite pastor.

My application was rejected, but I didn't have enough time left in the Army to get shipped overseas. You have to have six months' of active duty left. And there were six guys who stuck around and refused the orders. They became known as the Fort Lewis Six. They were jailed immediately and charges were brought against them.

I spent the next probably four months—I was out of the Army by then. Went back to Texas and gathered my gear up and came back here and worked on their case. They were ultimately all found guilty. Two of them spent two years in Leavenworth. Two of them spent a year in Leavenworth. One of them, because of weird circumstances, spent six months in jail.

One of them was let off because the military court was persuaded by his arguments that he was a refugee from Cuba. It would have been PTSD, I guess—they didn't have that term then—being around green uniforms because it reminded him of Castro's army. So, he played the anti-communist card and got away with it.

By that point, I had decided Seattle was my home. My wife and I moved up here, down in Tacoma, and I was pretty heavily involved in the antiwar movement. It was my unpaid job. Peggy, my wife, got a job teaching, and

expected that I was going to resume my life, whatever it had been prior to that. I'm assuming that meant I was going to go back and get a graduate degree and enter the business world.

To reel it back a little bit, I got a degree in business administration when I was in college, and I guess that was the life I was supposed to resume, but by that point, there was no way I was going to do that. I had expanded my critique of the war and the military to a pretty societal critique of the evils of capitalism, and my goal was to change that. Getting into the world of business was not the way I saw to do that.

That created some tensions with the marriage, and within a couple years, we divorced. I moved into Seattle and immediately threw myself into organizing a big march. It was the October 14th demonstration. It was a national demonstration. I was part of a contingent that was supporting the 14-point peace plan that had been put forth by the government of North Vietnam and the provisional revolutionary government of South Vietnam, most of which, if I recall, was achieved.

Collecting unemployment. I was one of those unemployed hippie radicals. I'm drifting a little bit. Sorry.

[00:32:07] **CINDY:** You said that you met Lou Truskoff and that you weren't doing music at that time. You were part of a study group.

[00:32:20] **BOB:** I, for some reason, didn't realize that you could do music and politics, so when I joined the Army, I sold my bass. When I got out of the Army and was up here, I was doing politics more than anything.

I saw a group called The Red Star Singers that was out of the Bay Area. They were a very political folk group. They just blew my mind because they were really good, and they were singing all these antiwar, anti-capitalist songs. Whoa. Whoa. This could happen.

Around the same time, Lou Truskoff, also one of the founding members of the Seattle Labor Chorus, had just moved to town with his partner, Joan, and had hooked up with some other folks in town, Jim Douglas among them, I think, although I think Jim might have come later.

They'd get together every once in a while and have a song circle. I knew some of the other folks that were doing this, so I got invited one night. Here's this guy, Lou Truskoff, who was a pretty good singer and a pretty good guitar player. Through the course of getting to know each other, we worked a few songs out—not just the two of us, there were others.

This was in the middle of the great farm workers great boycott. We'd go out at picket lines at the stores that were being boycotted and entertain the troops. That kind of got me hooked back into the music scene a little bit. I didn't get hooked in far enough to where I was performing much, but I was helping put on events even back then, and I would push for music to be part of the program because it seemed like a program without some music that was an hour of talking heads was boring.

There were some other cultural workers around. Jim Page was around then and we'd get him up on stages. So, I kind of got back into the music end of things through that.

[00:35:02] **CINDY:** What about your study group and going into the working class?

[00:35:06] **BOB:** While I was still in Tacoma, I hooked up with folks that were doing a G.I. coffeehouse. There were two of them. There was The Shelter Half and the Court C. These were radicals of various persuasions. I gravitated toward folks that were part of a group called the Revolutionary Union at the time.

Part of what they liked to do was get people studying together and learning history, learning political science, so I got hooked in with one of those study groups. That was transformative for me because it gave some substance to the gut feelings I was having.

After I moved to Seattle, I had enough differences with the Revolutionary Union that I didn't join them and hooked up with some other independent folks that were searching for an organization to be part of, searching for a more effective way to do their politics and their study.

One of the things this group felt was important was that we be part of the working class. We engaged in the process of proletarianization because most of us came from middle-class, petite bourgeoisie families and didn't have roots in the working class at all. So, one of our missions then became to get working-class jobs.

We decided that it would be the place for the men to go into the shipyards and the women to go into electronics because most of the workforce of the women was in the electronics industry and they guys were at the shipyards. So, that's what we did. Everybody in the study group got jobs.

After a very short period of time, the women realized that the men were making about twice as much money. This was the same time where there was some national legislation coming down that was forcing companies that didn't usually hire women to hire women.

So, we all ended up out in the shipyards, which made so much sense if you gave it about a half a minute's thought. But we all get caught up in our old ways, I guess. The women had to bash the guys' heads just a little bit. [laughing]

And they'd been doing some good work in the electronics field and making some ties, so it was hard on them, too, to leave that scene, but it just made sense if we were looking at a concentration of folks doing political work that we were all in the same place.

I ended up out at Lockheed Shipyard with the Ship Scalers Union, the shipyard laborers—part of the Laborers' International Union of North America—because it was an easy trade to get into. There were 13 different unions out in the shipyards. The Scalers were the unskilled workers and I wasn't a welder or a sheet metal worker or a pipefitter. I didn't know how to do any of that, but I could push a broom, and I could tack up buckets of heavy steel.

That's what I was doing out at Lockheed, working with folks in the union, and quickly discovered that the Scalers Union up here was, as the laborers' union were around the country, pretty mobbed up. The laborers particularly had a long history with the Mafia. The founder of the union, a guy named Angelo Fosco, was a good buddy of Al Capone's, so that history ran deep.

They didn't have so much of a physical presence out here, but they had enough grip that they made sure that the people that were running the union were compliant and weren't getting in the way of industry marching on, as industry wanted to march on.

The business agent at the time was fairly elderly at that time, an African American guy, who was perfectly happy to settle grievances by going into the office at whatever shipyards there was a grievance and having a little chat with management, and walking away with a fifth of Jack Daniels, and settling the grievance in support of the company.

It was pretty blatant behavior, and it was easy to organize around because it was so blatant. So, we were mobilizing against his behavior, and it evolved into, well, if you don't like the way he's running things, you guys ought to get together and run against him. [laughing] Which kind of made sense.

So, we began looking at how we would do that. By that time, we'd hooked up with some of the elders in union, particularly a guy named [Oscar Hurd], who'd worked in the yards since after World War II. He was part of the migration out here.

He was in World War II and settled out here from Alabama, if I recall, and had gotten involved in the union and was just this rank-and-file activist. He was one of the few real liberation theologian Christian kind of guys I've ever met. He saw the Bible as a call to action. He saw Jesus as a revolutionary. That's how he lived his life, and that can make you dangerous. He was a real treasure to have him as part of our caucus.

He had been out of the industry for a while. He had asbestosis and hadn't worked for a few years, but we drug him back into the caucus. As we started developing this slate to run against the old guard, it just made sense to have him be part of this slate.

We had a slate of seven people, rank-and-file workers from different shipyards. Three women, four men, one white guy—that was me. In June, I believe, in 1980, won the election. All but one of our slate got in, and the one person that didn't was a friendly person, so he wasn't part of the old guard.

We then had control of this union. Once we got the old business rep out—he had locked himself in the office and we had to bring the police in to get him out, which was silly—we began about five years of pretty dramatic struggles, not just with the shipyards, but with our international, and with some of the other crafts.

This was before the Justice Department came in and cleaned the union up. The old guard was still there and they immediately came down on us; sent the word out to the shipyards that we were not a legitimate slate, and that they shouldn't deal with us. They would fix it, not to worry. They would fix it.

They challenged the election. We re-ran the election. We won again. Then they challenged the legitimacy of [Oscar Hurd], who was elected as the business rep. They challenged his ability to run because they said he was retired.

So, we got embroiled in lawsuits that ultimately we lost. But by that time, it was clear that we were the legitimate leaders of the unions, so the shipyards had to at least acknowledge us.

The other thing that was happening right now—and this is relevant—is the shipyards were starting to downsize. We had been in a real boom period in the 70s and early 80s because Ronnie Reagan was building up his Navy, so we were building all these new Navy ships and submarine tenders and destroyers and frigates. Lockheed and Todd were both just booming.

When those jobs were complete, there was no other work and layoffs started. One of the unfortunate things that happens in a craft union situation, where you've got multiple crafts, is that jurisdictional disputes will happen, and given that we were the unskilled workers, it was easy for other crafts to say, "We'll do that work. The painters will do the sandblasting. The boilermakers will do fire watch. We'll clean up our own stuff."

So, we were fighting huge grievances that were specifically pointed at the company because they were authorizing it, but at the other crafts because they were basically behind it. We were fighting battles on a lot of fronts. Our treasury was diminishing because our members were getting laid off also.

Then contract negotiations came up in 83, I believe it was, and the Pacific Coast Metal Trades Council made a pact with the Pacific [American] Shipowners Association to agree to massive takeaways, cutting our wages by a third, decimating our health and welfare and pensions, and making the promise that if we accepted this contract, we would keep our jobs.

We knew better. Our little local had studied some of this stuff and saw the shipbuilding industry throughout the world going down the tubes. Korea had laid off 600,000 people in the shipbuilding industry. Japan had laid off over 500,000 people. The ships were built here in the U.S. They were built, so there was no more work, and we knew that the options were holding the line on the contract, and those of us who were still working would still be getting a fair contract, or we would accept this agreement and there would be massive layoffs, and those who were left working would be working under pretty awful conditions.

We were the only local on the West Coast. There were 13 locals here in Seattle and locals in Portland and Oakland and I think there was one other city. All of the unions except this one little local up here were all supporting this takeaway contract. We were pretty isolated. We were not allowed into the last few bargaining meetings because we were so off script.

The contract was approved, and within a few months, Lockheed closed and Todd was down to about half of the workforce. Lockheed shut down. They shut the doors. Just laid everybody off. It was pretty profoundly disastrous. A couple shipyard workers committed suicide because they'd been made this promise, and felt betrayed by everybody. Those folks that were left working were working for far less with awful conditions. We're just now in the position now where the wages are back up to the way they were in the mid- 80s.

The international came in and did one of the most novel receiverships I've ever seen. They didn't just put us in receivership. They moved the jurisdiction of our work to a local down in Tacoma and they offered our membership a choice. They could stay with us, with Local 541, or they could move down to Local 252 and keep their jobs. Though some folks wanted to fight them on that, we made the decision that there was no way that we would put our remaining membership through that kind of situation, so we led a mass sign-up into Local 252 and our local pretty much disbanded. That ended a very exciting but pretty traumatic little chapter.

During that period of time, though, among the things that we were able to do was move the consciousness of a lot of people beyond just struggling in the shipyards. There was a lot of international stuff going on at that point. The war in Central America was going on. The U.S. was supporting the Contras in Nicaragua and we were supporting a corrupt regime in El Salvador and some of us were involved in those struggles, and drawing links between the struggles there and the struggles here, and how money that was being used there could be better spent here.

I went down as a delegate from my union to a couple international trade union peace conferences in Nicaragua and El Salvador and brought information back here. We were mobilizing around those issues, which was another reason, I think, that we were viewed as outlaws, because we weren't just being good craft union members.

During this period of time, a couple things happened. I met a sheet metal worker, one of the women who got into the shipyards through the affirmative action stuff into the Sheet Metal Union, and was part of a rank-and-file caucus during the contract struggle that I talked about a minute ago. Got an immediate crush on her. Fell in love with her. Married her. We've got two kids. We're still together. But that was one of the personal benefits of that little chapter was working with other crafts and particularly working with this one person.

I had also started working with the National Rainbow Coalition, which had come on the scene when Jesse Jackson first ran for president. We formed a chapter here in the city, and then we quickly discovered that there

were chapters forming all over the state, and we formed into a national chapter, which is a whole nother story, which I could probably get into another time, because we were the radical Rainbow chapter up here, and had to take Jesse Jackson on a few times. It allowed us to do some really good work, and I was already spending a lot of time in that arena, so when things completely caved in with the Ship Scalpers Union, I jumped into doing a lot more work with the Rainbow.

At the same time, I was organizing rallies, participating in other mass actions that were going on around the city. Still going to the song circles. Hanging out with people that were doing music.

I met a guy named Scott Reed, who was, I think at the time, an organizer with OPEIU [Office and Professional Employees International Union]. He was also a musician. Had a little group. We used to go to rallies, and inevitably, we would get together afterwards and critique the rally. "Sound sucked." "Program sucked." "We could do so much better."

After a few months of doing that, we realized that we could either keep talking or we could do something about it. So, we went down to Breitenbush [Hot Springs]. Spent a weekend on a retreat down there and formed a business plan for starting Rise Up! Productions. We offered our services to the movement, which expanded to all phases of the movement—the progressive movement, the antiwar movement, the labor movement, some in the Democratic Party.

We would do sound and staging for events. Got a reputation for knowing what we were doing, and being able to help out with programming, and putting on pretty good programs. Did a lot of work in the labor movement. Worked with the King County Labor Council.

I'm going to blank on what year it was. It was somewhere in the 90s. We're fast-forwarding into the 90s. Bill Clinton was President, and it was nearing the end of his term. Al Gore had not yet announced that he was running.

Labor Day came around and Rise Up! was producing the King County Labor Council's Labor Day picnic. Seattle at that time was a pretty hot labor city. We were one of the union cities in the country. We were rocking it. The labor community was pretty together. There was funding coming in to staff people to work on different struggles.

John Sweeney, who was president of the AFL-CIO at the time, announced that he wanted to come out and spend Labor Day in Seattle with the hot union city. Very shortly thereafter, Al Gore, who, I'm sure, was already laying the base for running for President, decided that he wanted to be where John was on Labor Day.

We're suddenly confronted with the Vice President of the United States coming out to our sleepy Labor Day picnic in Green Lake. It just blew the lid off the picnic. [laughing] We had Secret Service coming in here wanting to cut trees down for line of sight, and put snipers up in trees, and establish perimeters with snipers over hills.

One of the high points of that adventure was that Ron Judd was head of the King County Labor Council at that time. There was some big meeting out at Green Lake with all of these folks, where they were pointing to trees that they wanted to cut down. Ron says, "Look, we didn't invite you guys here. You're not going to come in here and mess up a park. You can come, you can bring the Vice President, but you're just going to have to go along with how we're doing this and back the Secret Service off." [laughing]

It was pretty stunning. Ron is still my hero.

What started out to be a pretty low-key little Labor Day picnic with a little stage and a little band and some speakers turned into this huge production, which Rise Up! Productions was scrambling to do, because we'd never done anything near that scope for anybody, much less bringing in the Vice President of the United States and all of the stuff that goes along with that.

But we managed to not crash the show. We managed to pull it off pretty well. [laughing] That kind of upped the reputation of our little production company and put us in a different place than we had been, for good or ill. Mostly good.

I was still working another job. I'd bounced around and done a few other jobs after the union had been taking over. I was working in an environmental consulting firm at that point and had just moved my mom out from Texas. She was living with us. She was elderly and in need of some help.

I got called into the office of the company I worked for and was told that I'd been right-sized—a term I hadn't heard before—which comes to mean that after they laid a few of us off, the company was just the right size. It was great timing because Rise Up! was starting to take off.

I had my mother living at the house and I was trying to do two other jobs, Rise Up! and this consulting job, so being freed up from that was a blessing. I felt bad for about five minutes, and as I was packing my stuff up and packing it into my car, the minute I hit the key to my car, I felt like this huge, huge block of concrete had been lifted off my shoulders. It was a pretty amazing feeling. I didn't look back.

Rise Up! continued putting along, and then 1997 came along and we had been trying to get—well, there's a festival, Northwest Folklife. I guess my audience here knows about Northwest Folklife. We'd been trying to get Pete Seeger to come out for several years to be part of the festival.

Scott went back to a gathering called the Great Labor Arts Exchange back on the East Coast, and Pete was there. Pete agreed to come out if we could get him on at Folklife. You can imagine Folklife's reaction. "You got Pete Seeger to come out here? Oh, my gawd!"

I remember this day when we were meeting with the program director. We were just talking about where Pete was going to perform, how many times he'd perform—the logistics—and she came in really down because they had lost their feature act, which was going to be their anchor for their theme that year. It was going to be Russian culture and the Bolshoi was going to come out. Oh, my gawd.

They'd canceled, so Kathy—Kathy was her name—was distracted by that. "It's great Pete's coming out, but we don't know what we're going to do about FolkLife."

Scott and I kind of worked on the psychic level. We didn't need to have a lot of conversations about some stuff. We immediately started throwing out ideas for how we could turn the theme of FolkLife into labor culture. We were making shit up as we went along. [laughing]

We started throwing things out, like, okay, Pete wants a chorus. We're going to have to get a chorus together. So, let's think about having a stage where this chorus plays in. We think we might be able to get the director of the New York Labor Chorus to come out and direct the chorus if we get this chorus together.

There's all these great labor performers around the country—Anne Feeney and Jon Fromer and Charlie King and Elise Bryant and several other people—we could probably get them to come out.

There's this labor muralist. Maybe we could get him to come out and do a people's mural. And there's a couple of labor plays that we know we could mount, and we could get that going. And we hear there's this labor educators' conference that's happening right about the same time. Maybe we could combine the two events.

Kathy's just looking at us like we are insane crazy. [laughing] But she said, "Could you really make that happen?" And we said, "Oh, sure. Heck, yeah!" [laughing]

So, we did, and it became a pretty notable event because what we did was we did combine the labor educators' conference, which is an international conference of labor educators that was happening mostly out at the University of Washington. We were able to attract pretty much everybody that we had thrown out that would be way cool to bring out.

We managed to put the conference together just so it flowed right in. It started a couple days before FolkLife, and then there was a day of overlap, so we had performers going out to the labor educators' conference. We had several workshops put on by the labor educators as part of the FolkLife festival. It was the great labor arts and history festival.

Reeling it back, one of the things that we figured would maybe be the hardest thing we had to do was actually pull together a labor chorus. We had a conversation with, I think, Janet Stecher first, and she really told us we were crazy. [laughing] And Lou Truskoff, who didn't feel like he could do it, but he said, "You find somebody, I'll work with them." And [?Ross Rieder?], who was kind of the same way. "I don't know if I can pull that off."

At this point, we had to have a labor chorus. There was not an option. Pete wanted a chorus. This festival was happening. One of the centerpieces was going to be the chorus. I might have had tears in my eyes when I went back and talked to Janet, begging and beseeching. [laughing] She reluctantly agreed that she would help pull this together.

So, we got Lou and Janet together. Lou's wife, Joan, became our coordinator for recruiting people. They put out notices in different union newsletters. "Wanna come do a pickup chorus and sing with Pete Seeger at FolkLife?" [laughing]

I think over 50 people accepted the call, so we immediately started rehearsing in the old Carpenters' Hall. Geoffrey Fairweather, the director of the New York Labor Chorus, agreed that he would come out and direct us, and would come out a few days early and rehearse with us. He worked with Janet ahead of time developing repertoires, so we had a set that we were working on.

And the Seattle Labor Chorus was born. We were, at that time, a pickup chorus with one purpose, and that was to perform at FolkLife. Scott and I were very clear that we did not want to talk about after FolkLife. We didn't want to think about institutionalizing this. It was like this was going to be a way fun thing. C'mon out. Do FolkLife. Sing with Pete. That was it.

It was pretty amazing. We sang not only with Pete, but most of the other performers that we brought in from around the country sang with the chorus when we made our debut on—I'm blanking on the name of the stage we were on. It was the outside stage—the Mural Lawn—singing in the evening just as the sun was going down. It was a pretty magic experience.

The whole weekend was pretty amazing. We did one of the biggest productions of the performance called Links in a Chain, which Mike Honey, out of Tacoma, had put together. It's the story of the intersection of the labor movement and the civil rights movement through music. The Total Experience Gospel Choir anchored it, and Pete was part of it, and a number of other performers were part of it.

We blew the lid off the old Mercer Arena. It was packed. There were people around the block who couldn't get in. As the show was nearing an end, the program director of FolkLife came up and said, "Do you think Pete might be willing to do a set on his own?" [laughing]

Of course, he would, so the show got extended after Links finished. Pete came out, and Pete and his grandson, Tao Rodriguez, did a whole nother set. It was an amazing night. It was an amazing weekend.

One of the conversations I remember happening after the Labor Chorus's performance was Jim Roe—Jim and a couple of other people—saying, "You know, I don't think we should even have any conversations about going on. We should end things right now. We will never, ever do anything to top this." [laughing]

That might have been the first formal conversation that happened about, yeah, maybe the chorus should go on.

It was such an experience that you'd have to either say, "Let's never do anything because it'll just be a failure after this." Or "This is pretty cool. Maybe we ought to keep this together."

I don't remember if we got together to do a debriefing or what, but we met shortly thereafter. I'd say the consensus was let's try and keep this together. Let's be the Seattle Labor Chorus. Some of our more organizational-type people came forward and volunteered to pull up some bylaws and form a real organization, which drove some people crazy, but it also laid a solid base for us to be this thing that would keep going.

Janet, at this point, was hooked enough [laughing] that she decided to stay with us and be our director. We've been going since then. Seventeen years the Labor Chorus has been going strong. I think we've even done a few things that were at least as cool as that day's performance.

We've been on an international tour. We've traveled to several places around the country. We are a real asset to the labor movement here in the Northwest. We're recognized as one of the best labor choruses in the country. There aren't many of them, so it's not like there's hundreds that we're among the best of, but we might have even been called the best labor chorus by some people who would know those things.

We have no plans on quitting. We're planning on putting out our third CD this summer, I think, as I understand it. I think maybe I'm out of words.

[01:12:03] **CINDY:** Okay. And Rise Up! is still going strong?

[01:12:07] **BOB:** Rise Up! is still going strong. We were involved in last weekend's Paddle in Seattle. We're involved in trying to shut the Shell oil rig out of town. We produced a big rally. We've got a sound system out on a barge right now that's part of keeping the pressure on to get Shell out of town. Actually, we want to keep the barge here and not let it go.

Yes, going strong.

[01:12:36] **CINDY:** Thank you very much, Bob.